

Student Experiences in Online Doctoral Programs: A Critical Review of the Literature

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Abstract : The study of online graduate education started just 30 years ago, with the first online graduate program in the 1990s. Institutions are looking for ways to increase retention and support the needs of students with the rapid expansion of online higher education due to the global pandemic. Online education provides access and opportunities to those who otherwise would be unable to pursue an advanced degree for logistical reasons. Thus, the objective of the critical literature review is to survey current research of student experiences given the expanding role of online doctoral programs. The guiding research questions are: What are the personal, professional, and student life practices of graduate students who enrolled in a fully online university doctoral program or course? and How do graduate students who enrolled in a fully online doctoral program or course describe the factors that contributed to their continued study? The systematic literature review was conducted employing a variety of databases to locate articles using key Boolean terms and synonyms within three categories of the e-learning, doctoral education, and student perspectives. Inclusion criteria for the literature review consisted of empirical peer-reviewed studies with original data sources that focused on doctoral programs and courses within a fully online environment and centered around student experiences. A total of 16 articles were selected based on the inclusion criteria and systemically analyzed through coding using the Boote and Beile criteria. Major findings suggest that doctoral students face stressors related to social and emotional wellbeing in the online environment. A lack of social connection, isolation, and burnout were the main challenges experienced by students. Students found support from their colleagues, advisors, and faculty to persist. Communities and cohorts of online doctoral students were found to guard against these challenges. Moreover, in the methods section of the articles, there was a lack of specificity related to student demographics, general student information, and insufficient detail about the online doctoral program. Additionally, descriptions regarding the experiences of cohorts and communities in the online environment were vague and not easily replicable with the given details. This literature review reveals that doctoral students face social and emotional challenges related to isolation and the rigor of the academic process and lean on others for support to continue in their studies. Given the lack of current knowledge about online doctoral students, it proves to be a challenge to identify effective practices and create high-retention doctoral programs in online environments. The paucity of information combined with the dramatic transition to e-learning due to the global pandemic can provide a perfect storm for attrition in these programs. Several higher education institutions have transitioned graduate studies online, thus providing an opportunity for further exploration. Given the new necessity of online learning, this work provides insight into examining current practices in online doctoral programs that have moved to this modality during the pandemic. The significance of the literature review provides a springboard for research into online doctoral programs as the solution to continue advanced education amongst a global pandemic.

Keywords : e-learning, experiences, higher education, literature review

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